

Blackened Tradition

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I. Introduction

Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, having attended a performing arts high school, diversity was to be expected. Walking down the halls of my school one could describe us as being a true melting pot. Politics such as race were not even thought of, let alone an issue within our everyday lives. Therefore, I was aware of my race but not truly aware of the power, weight, or emotional charge placed behind the history of the melanin in my skin.

I was exposed to just how politically charged my skin was the moment the Trayvon Martin case verdict was revealed. My life and my life's story changed that day. I remember sitting on the floor in my living room waiting on the sentencing of Zimmerman. I just knew that justice would be served and that this case would not be pushed under the rug because I had hope in our country. Before that point in my life I can say that I identified as an American because I loved my country and respected all that it had to offer.

Unfortunately, that was the moment I realized that I am a post-colonial African in America. I realized that at that moment my skin color carried history that made this country think that it was ok to strip me of my rights. I was amazed as to how much power the color of someone's skin could have and wondered what was it like to be a part of group whose lack of melanin granted them immortality. It was at that moment that I knew as an artist it was my job to shine a light on the wrongdoings my people have been through, because not speaking up implies my support of such hatred.

During my final year of high school I WOKE up and created my very first political work titled *Endangered Species*. I created *Endangered Species* based on my desire to make known the war on our Black men. It was my intention to provide a voice to those wrongly accused and

murdered due to police brutality. My final year in high school was my first dip into the activist pond and I never looked back.

Fast-forwarding to my first year of college I went through a big culture shock. I was beginning to not only come to terms that I am a woman of African descent in America, but also that I blatantly do not look like anyone within the “superior” race. I began to notice that within my classrooms that one of two mistakes were happening: one, my black history was being left out of the class room or not acknowledged; two, my history was being spoon fed to the descendants of colonizers simply to rid them of the uncomfortability they deserved. Therefore, I was either in search of finding my people and our history or I was completely cultureless as a result of attending a predominantly white institution.

Meanwhile, within the country there were still countless deaths due to intentional police brutality, protests were almost every other day, and on our very campus students of color were being told to go back to Africa when seen protesting the wrongful deaths of our brothers and sisters. I unfortunately had lived through many experiences of micro-aggressions and or discrimination that revealed itself in phrases such as: “Are you sure you can pay for all of that?”, “Oh my gosh, you actually can dance.”, “I’m not sure or confident in your capabilities to create work/movement.”, and “As an artist do you even have much to say?”.

Unfortunately, during my first two years of college this was my world. My talents were doubted due to my skin color, and small situations such as my ability to pay for an article of clothing happened often. All I knew was that I loved to dance and I was very interested in the activism happening around me. I also knew that my history was being left behind and often not acknowledged and I needed to find a way to bring attention to it.

II. Methodology

All these experience led me to my first work within the department titled *Worthless Freedom*. This work was meant to take back my voice as a choreographer and revisit my voice as an activist. This piece challenged the idea that privilege has the right to ignorance of the history belonging to the creators of the Americas, slaves.

As a woman of African descent I understand that “Art for the sake of art” is NOT a universal concept. This is a way of thinking that has stemmed from those of European descent and is solely derived from a place of privilege. However, ALL art created by those with an African ancestry has purpose. Therefore, it is my personal belief that dance should be utilized for something much deeper rather than simply showcasing bodies for entertainment. It is during the creation of *Worthless Freedom* that I began to strive to make choreography that is transcendent of just an experience.

Since being at the university I learned that everything I created is not always made in my blackness but as a person and artist I am always aware of my otherness. It is for this reason that I have chosen to accept that the moment I step on stage my body is politicized; and I can either take advantage of it or chose to be blind to how the world will view my art. With this in mind, I dove into understanding the history of black people and our relationship to the world we were forced into. In doing so I came across a new way of thinking that is that Colonizers are the creators of blackness. From the moment my ancestors stepped foot on “American soil” they were programed to know that they are “black” or the opposite of white. Blackness was not a term created by Africans because they knew themselves to be people of Africa. That is all.

Therefore, the moment the concept of blackness was created the world began to associate many elements within our society with either blackness or whiteness. Unfortunately, these terms

began to take control of our art forms and ways of expression, and inevitably created a divide as to what “blacks” were allowed to associate themselves with. It is in this divide that the segregation within concert stage dance began. European bodies of sameness were seen on proscenium stages whereas Africanist bodies were seen in cypher circles and or jazz or swing dance clubs.

Without a doubt, we are able to see our country’s familiarity with segregation show up on our stages today and even in the mindsets of viewers and appreciators of art. For example, if you ask non-dancers or people who do not identify as an artist, “What is the first thing they think of when they think of dance?”. More often than not these people will say ballet and more specifically big stage ballet productions such as *Sleeping Beauty* or the *Nutcracker*. All of these associations are synonymous with whiteness, and manifest into stages full of European bodies with very similar statures, gracefully dancing to classical music.

However, it is very rare for a person’s first thought of dance to be a stage full of African American performers gracefully dancing to classical music. Why is this? Well, we as people have been brain washed to a point where stereotypes inform our way of understanding the capabilities of groups of people. For example, when I step foot on stage the audience has already created an idea of what is expected of me, that being West African, modern, or hip-hop. Never will I step on stage and the audience expect me to move fluently to classical music. Why? Because these stereotypes are essential pillars of whiteness that work to consistently empower those who are privileged enough to benefit from them. Additionally, because I identify myself as an activist I place myself in another box of stereotypes. My work specifically is expected to be very “in your face” about blackness “fighting the powers that be” and never letting the “white man get me down”.

With all this in mind I wanted to create a work that challenged the status quo of dance, while still staying true to my love for activism. In this project I am looking to challenge the ideas that classical music is best paired with Eurocentric bodies of sameness. I also became interested in how Africanist, modern, and contemporary movement on a black body paired with classical music, will change the stereotypes associated with classical music genres, and the choreographic/artistic possibilities of African American performers.

III. Procedure

It is through my many experiences here at OSU that I chose to embark on the choreographic process entitled *Blackened Tradition* to create three separate solos. Throughout the entirety of my process I began each creation period by challenging myself and my dancers with the task of scribing music through the body. Scribing is defined by a dancer's ability to match the shifts of the music and or vocals with their body.

Each of us were first given the opportunity to improvise to music we were very familiar with. This an understating to what it is like to actively scribe music in the body. The second stage of improvisation was paired with music each dancer was completely unfamiliar with. Stage two began to train our ears to welcome in the sound of classical music. I was very aware that music selections for each solo made choices of which we as dancers were not trained in hearing. I intentionally did this exercise because it forced each of us to really listen to the shifts of music whether that be a change in tempo, melody, or intensity.

I began creating the very first solo during my Summer Research Opportunity Program. During the summer I went to study with Urban Bush Woman ten days in Brooklyn, New York. During this intensive, we worked on redefining our own solo practice as well as finding different ways to inform our movement making process. We worked with creating text reminiscent of

memories of our past and we used this text to inform our movement. This helped rid us of falling into movement habits and or overthinking our movement instincts. The goal was to rid ourselves of falling victim to the artistic block.

When creating my first solo, I took time during the summer to familiarize myself with my current movement choices. I noticed that during my solo studies that I was constantly placing movement within my improvisation that was reminiscent of movement seen within ballet. I was noticing that within my solo practice I was heavily moving from fifth positions, high passés, and piqués. I noticed that I was doing things that, if in front of an audience, would validate my movement choices simply because it was associated with European-like dance forms. What was even more interesting is that I was always in the studio alone and was never in front of an audience at all. It is also important to note that ballet and its vocabulary is not my first language at all and even I had fallen into this mindset that balletic movement validates a performance or improvisational session.

Rather than run away from my findings, I decided to embrace this dichotomy; and embark on my very first solo *Shakin' Up Right* was created. This solo plays with the concepts of shifting in and out of a grounded vibratory position into a very upright stacked spine position. It is because of the frequent shifts in and out of my natural movement aesthetic, that I accompanied this solo with a costume that was both black and white. Both colors expose their own stream of consciousness within the mindsets of people; and within dance both colors harbor their own codified dance forms. Hence, I was able to visually represent the cultural identities I was exploring, without having to verbally explain anything at all.

The shifts within the movement also showcase the music shifts as well. I chose to have the first solo accompanied by Domenico Scarlatti's *Sonata in E Minor*. This piece of music

begins with high fluttering notes of a piano, accompanied by slow syncopated undertones of the same instrument. *Shakin' Up Right* matches the layering of the music by intentionally switching in and out the dominate sounds. I challenged my body to bring attention to even the smallest of notes, that way the overall solo inevitably contained many rhythmic and weight dynamics.

Overall, I embraced that in this moment in my life I was trying to shake off the whiteness that was imposed on my mind and body as having a higher currency over my own movement instincts. *Shakin' Up Right* was very vibratory because during this time I also was trying to rid my mind of this toxic way of viewing myself and my movement.

When creating my second solo I fell into an artistic rut. During this semester I was being fed ballet and Cunningham technique which in many ways is strictly ballet. Throughout my entire dance career, I have never felt my voice so suppressed. During many rehearsals I simply could not hear my choreographic voice at all because I was not being fed within my daily studies. I realized that I was very quickly losing my artistic instinct because of the dance technique that was being placed on my body. With this in mind I was only able to create movement when master classes rolled around in the department or when I was able to partake in Africanist movement patterns.

It is because of my history in creating this work that it is in an all-white costume. It is symbolic of how my voice was suppressed and covered up due to my inability to find myself within my everyday movement practice. Therefore, this solo was created with close attention to the carriage of the arms, head placement, a stacked spine and specific leg placement. It is full of pencil turns, attitudes, and penchés; but as the solo comes to an end there is a moment of gestures. These gesture accentuate the body of the black woman and says “this is me, I am me, and I am here to stay”.

I chose to compliment my second solo to Domenico Scarlatti's *Sonata in B Minor*. I came across this piece of music during my junior year in my Music and Choreography Composition class taught by Daniel Roberts. I was challenged to find a new way of listening to classical music. Therefore, I began to count the music as well as make visual pictures as to how I heard the music. The dynamic changes translated into different textural drawings and therefore brought me to the very wave like movement in the beginning of the work. Drawing out the shifts in the music came to be another way of informing my movement patterns and diversify how I hear music with very complex layering.

I entitled my second solo *Still Pushin'* because it is the definition of resiliency. Through my struggle I was able to inch forward and make progress and slow progress is indeed progress. I learned how important it was for me to continue to seek out my own culture because it is essential to my artistry. I also learned how much my history and technical studies of dances, deriving from the African Diaspora, inform my artistic process.

Going into my final solo I only had a month of rehearsal time available. Consequently, I needed to find a way to inform my movement aside from the improvisational exercises and movement. I chose to allow this final solo to heavily utilize text. Rather than just write down a memory, I decided to create a prayer that verbalized my outcry for a European dominated world, to understand my body. The prayer reads as follows:

I pray God

"God. I Pray to God, for a direction, speak, move, but I hear nothing.

I feel stuck, in my thoughts, I stutter, and stutter, and stutter.

In a world, of whiteness, my body doesn't fit.

So God. I pray to God for a direction, speak, move, but I hear nothing.

My flow is not understood, my skin, it's seen as unable, and I am forced to move.

God. I pray to God for a direction, speak, move, but I hear something.

I am, looking, looking, for a place to be, and I come up empty handed.

God. I pray to God for a direction, speak, move, but I hear, me.

My voice rings, around me, and traps the negativity. STOP.

God. I pray to God for a direction, speak, move, but I hear, me.

They say, you can't, you won't, you shouldn't.

God! I pray to God for a direction, speak, guide, so I hear YOU.”

I Pray God allowed me to be open and vulnerable about my true feelings of being a black artist in a world dominated by whiteness. I began creating my final solo *In the Gutta*’, with the intention of rebelling against the oppressive artistic mindset placed upon me throughout my years of study. *In the Gutta*’ is a play on words that hints towards phrases such as “In My Hood” or “In My Home”. Such a title spoke to my desire to show the world that grounded Africanist movement is my home and I should not be looked down upon for my inability to perfectly command movement of European descent. I chose to place my dance in all black because my final solo shows a stripping away of a mindset that places whiteness over my blackness.

The final solo was accompanied by Domenico Scarlatti’s *Sonata in D minor*. I chose to choreograph to a heavier piece of music with lots of space because I wanted the movement to fill the voids within the music. I chose to have a slower piece of music to match the decrescendo of the movement and music within the solos. It’s also imperative to note that *In the Gutta* takes on a more serious note and movement analysis of my identity as an African American woman.

Therefore, I chose a piece of music, also played by the piano, that works with about nine to ten

phrasings of notes over a span of two minutes. I wanted to express that my final solo was all about an attentiveness to the body rather than how extravagant the music could become.

The culmination of this process was an eleven-minute performance containing all three solos that function as a vehicle to break the stereotypes placed upon African American performers. *Blackened Tradition* addresses the political barriers within dance by presenting more than just the beauty of a black body; rather, the idea that classical music genres should be colorless in their ability to be paired with performers that have many racial ethnicities without it being a visual assumption.

I purposely chose to keep the exact same composer for all three solos to showcase that just as a classically trained composer, of European descent, can dynamically change up his musical direction, so can I. *Blackened Tradition* showcases my artistic capabilities as well as the capabilities of African American dancers. In other words, we as artists no matter our shade are EQUAL. These solos visually show my internal struggle to find and keep my voice as an artist in a world full of individuals who will never understand why my blackness is a place of struggle created by invaders of this country. The color of my skin should never hinder me from having a vast vocabulary of creative capabilities and or surprise my peers/audiences because of preconceived notions about the black female form.

IV. Significance of Research

As my career unfolds I hope to continue to make works that help progress my community. I want to make sure that I am always finding new ways to showcase that the Africanist presence on stage is nonnegotiable. Without diverse stages we inevitably are robbing our audiences and our dancers of the chance to become aware of the importance that our diverse communities have around us.

I am positive that works like my own are needed to help open the minds of our society. I am also confident that as an African in America it is important that I continue to create whether or not someone is watching. It is also urgent that I recognize that I can only express and create based on my own awareness; if I am not feeding that voice, it is easy to fall into the everyday consciousness created by our stereotyped society. *Blackened Tradition* has helped me to realize that my art is my only truth and it is my job to create in order to save my people from the oppressive societal constructs of blackness.

V. Future Endeavors

As a result of *Blackened Tradition*, I would like to embark on another artistic process entitled *Mothers in Chains*. I would like to create a work that explores the archetype of the African American woman within our history. Black women are mothers, caretakers, sisters, wives, protectors, absorbers of pain but most importantly the healers of all wounds. However, women, within black history, almost always take a back seat to the man. Men are seen as the heads of all households and women are seen as the support systems behind the man. Therefore, I want to bring attention to just how important women are and have been to the survival of the black house hold.